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AUTHOR DeBoer, Valetta Jane
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ABSTRACT

Learning to communicate is important for today's foreign language student, and it is important to provide meaningful communicative experiences in writing as well as speaking the language. A letter exchange between peers can provide a meaningful and exciting writing experience for lower-level students. While not entirely without problems, arranging such an experience has many advantages. It allows students to build on their own experiences but to communicate at a level that is within their linguistic capabilities. It also provides meaningful reading experience, and communicating with and learning about another person is in itself valuable. A letter exchange can be established with students in another country, but time and logistical constraints may make exchange with American students more practical. An exchange between two Ohio high schools had the added dimension of being supported by a National Education Association/Kodak grant to use cameras for a snapshot exchange to extend the letters' content. Recommendations for planning a letter exchange include: selecting schools close enough so teachers can meet but far enough apart so students will not converse on the telephone in English; establishing a minimum letter length; establishing a one-letter-a-month schedule; reviewing letter-writing skills before beginning; and allowing class time for questions and/or reading aloud the letters received. (MSE)

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DEVELOPING WRITING PROFICIENCY FOR THE LOWER-LEVEL FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENT

Veletta Jane DeBoer
Worthington HS, Worthington, Ohio

Foreign language teachers often find themselves searching for creative ways to stimulate interest in writing for the lower-level student. For many foreign language teachers and students, "a composition in the target language is just another language exercise rather than the communication of a message" (1). One reason may be that teachers find it difficult to locate realistic activities for the lower-level student. Although communicative competence is a goal, most writing activities to achieve this are, at lower levels, somewhat artificial and are restricted by the student's limited knowledge of the language. Many times a teacher will simply assign a topic for a composition, and the student must create a grammatically correct piece of work. Writing is arduous when it is uninspired and does not draw from the student's own experience. "Only with extreme difficulty can most students write about unfamiliar concepts, situations, and environments. Therefore, in choosing topics for writing exercises, attention should be placed upon selecting themes drawn from known contexts or themes that can be directly related to personal experiences" (2).

One form of writing that can achieve some realism and draw from students' personal experience is letter writing. Allen and Valette (3) state that "writing letters can become a very meaningful classroom activitiy, especially if the letters are sent and answers received" (4). A penpal exchange program is sometimes arranged with students from target countries. This, however, presents some problems for the teacher as well as for the lower-level student.

The first difficulty in letter exchanges with other countries is locating enough students from a target country to participate in an exchange with entire classes of foreign language students. Individual exchanges are often successful, but an exchange involving 100 or more students, for example, is very difficult for most teachers to arrange. Even when sufficient numbers of students are located, coordination of the program is difficult since it is unlikely that the cooperating teachers will have the opportunity to meet and discuss the project.

Another problem concerns time constraints. It is often difficult to exchange more than one or two letters per school year because, since the schools involved are so distant from each other, the necessary coordination is lacking. When only one or two letters are exchanged, it does not provide the students with enough opportunity to become acquainted with his or her penpal.

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Finally, the most significant problem concerns language comprehension. A lower-level student often has difficulty in interpreting the foreign language response. A limited vocabulary as well as inexperience in reading non-structured material makes the task of reading the response rather frustrating for the lower-level students, negating the positive value of the intercultural communicative aspects.

In order to avoid the frustrations and difficulties of a penpal exchange with a target country, teachers may want to consider a pen-pal exchange with a similar group of lower-level American students. There are several advantages with this type of exchange. First, the teachers will have greater opportunity to communicate with one another to plan the exchange and the writing activities. Students will also have the chance to exchange letters more often. Finally students will be able to read with relative ease the responses from their penpals since a similar vocabualry and a similar knowledge of the foreign language as well as knowledge of the world will be reflected in the letters.

Ohio penpals

One such exchange has taken place during the 1983-84 school year. Approximately 110 second-year Spanish students from Worthington High School in Worthington, Ohio, and 110 second-year Spanish students from Normandy High School in Parma, Ohio, began writing to each other in the fall. The first letter was simply a letter of introduction including information such as name, age, likes and dislikes, classes, family, friends, and pastimes. The topics for the following letters were selected by the students; the teachers, however, offered suggestions when needed. Most students had little trouble finding topics on which to write. Sometimes a pair of students found something in common such as a favorite music group, a sport, or a hobby, and they wrote about these pastimes. The most frequent topics included weekends, music, sports, and school. One set of penpals discovered they had both visited Hawaii and wrote about shared experiences on their vacations.

Occasionally penpals discovered that they disagreed about favorite music groups, classes or ball teams. This, however, seemed helpful to them when writing the letters since it offered a more spirited exchange. One student from Normandy wrote that her favorite football team was the Cleveland Browns. Her penpal from Worthington wrote back explaining that he didn't like the Browns very much; he was a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. They both agreed, however, that it was terrific that the Redskins won the Superbowl.

At holiday time, the Worthington students decided to make cards for their penpals. Each student made a card from construction paper and enclosed a letter discussing holiday plans and

wishes. After the holiday break, the students were learning the preterite tense and found it easy to write to their penpals about vacation activities and gifts received over the holidays. Students, of course, are always looking forward to the next holiday, and this was evident in the next exchange. Many students were already discussing plans for Spring break.

NEA/Kodak "Cameras in the Curriculum" project

Curiosity about the penpal continued to grow. In the second and third exchanges, a large percentage of the students asked for pictures of their penpals and asked for more information about the other school. The teachers involved decided to capitalize on the interest expressed by the students and applied for and received an NEA/Kodak "Cameras in the Curriculum" grant. The photo project was planned as an additional incentive for students to develop writing proficiency.

The "Cameras in the Curriculum" project provoked even greater enthusiasm in the classroom. Students were eager to see pictures of their penpals and their schools, their community and their friends. The project, therefore, involved several different activities. First, a mini-unit on photography was taught by a specialist in each school who visited the Spanish classes and gave lessons on snapshot photography. Students also learned vocabulary associated with photography and participated in vocabulary development activities and communicative exercises in class. Next, students took snapshots focusing on other students from the school, on the school itself, on school activities, and on typical community scenes of activities. Snapshots were taken of small groups of students so that all students had pictures of themselves to send to their penpals. These pictures were used as a point of departure to extend the content of their letters, especially the letters of the poorer students. Students took meaningful pictures and wrote about them and about corresponding ideas. Students were able to use these ideas to recombine and extend basic sentence patterns in their writing.

As a final activity, an exchange field trip was planned so that student penpals from each school could visit the other school. Students who participated in the exchange were introduced to their penpals at a reception at the beginning of the day. Additionally, they visited classes, toured the school (with commentary given in Spanish by other students), and attended a social gathering for all participating penpals. Several designated student photographers took pictures during the visit; they photographed penpal pairs, small groups of students from the different schools interacting, and school scenes. The students participating in the exchange used these pictures to report in Spanish on the field trip to other students at their home school. In addition to the use of pictures as a point of departure to develop

writing proficiency, students were also able to take advantage of project activities to practice oral communication skills.

Resolving problems

Although the project proved very successful, a few problems were encountered. One problem, for example, was student procrastination. On each exchange a few students missed the mailing deadlines and their letters were mailed late. This resulted in disappointed penpals who did not receive letters the same day as other classmates.

Student attrition was another problem. When students dropped Spanish class or moved to another school, it was necessary to find new penpals. In some cases a second-year volunteer wrote letters to two penpals and in other cases a third-year student volunteered. These new penpal pairs, unfortunately, did not have the same opportunity to become acquainted with their pen-pals.

Another minor problem occurred because the two schools used different textbooks. Occasionally the vocabulary used in a letter was not familiar to the penpal. Sometimes, however, this was a learning experience since the students were learning new words and synonyms for words they had already learned. Students at one school, for example, had learned the word baloncesto and at the other school básquetbol.

Letters contained errors in spite of proofreading by teachers, but this was also a learning experience. At both schools, students wrote rough drafts of letters, teachers pointed out but did not correct errors, and students then rewrote the letter for mailing. Most students corrected some but not all errors on this second copy. Many students were nevertheless pleased to realize that they could communicate with someone else in the target language even though their attempts were not linguistically perfect. The use of language beyond the classroom concerns for accuracy made this a true communicative experience.

One final difficulty was the students' desire to communicate in English. Although students were instructed not to exchange addresses, some attempted to include this information in the letters. These students were instructed by the teachers to rewrite the letter excluding the address. Students were permitted to communicate only in Spanish until the field trip when students were permitted to exchange information if they desired.

Recommendations

Teachers interested in starting this type of exchange may want to consider the following recommendations. First, those teachers who do not know another teacher with whom to arrange an exchange may ask other teachers in the school or surrounding

schools if they know of someone who might be interested. Attending a foreign language meeting, workshop, or conference is also a good opportunity to meet other language teachers who are looking for new ideas. Finally, teachers may write to their state foreign language organization; most have newsletters that will accept and publish letters to the editor (4).

In arranging an exchange, several helpful hints may be kept in mind. First, the school chosen should be close enough so that teachers may arrange a meeting to organize the project, but far enough apart so that students cannot look up telephone numbers to call each other on the phone and converse in English. Once the project begins, it is wise to set minimum requirments. Letters of approximately fifteen sentences in length worked well, although some students, especially in the later letters, chose to write much longer letters.

A timetable that works well for the exchange is approximately one letter a month. Students often expressed a desire to write more often, but administrative tasks such as proofreading, grading, and mailing take time, so the once-a-month timetable was preferable for the teachers.

Before the first letter is actually written, it would be helpful for the classes to review letter-writing skills. Teachers can discuss the salutation, body, and closing of letters, and can give students a vocabulary list of words that may be used in these sections (i.e., Dear, Sincerely, your friend, write soon, etc.). In addition, it should be made clear that all communication will be made in Spanish until the end of the project, and, therefore, students may not exchange addresses until then. When students are ready to begin writing, it may also be helpful to give them time in class so that the teachers may provide suggestions if needed.

Finally, when the letters arrive from the other school, they may also be given time in class to read and share their letters. Students enjoy reading not only the letters from their own penpals, but letters from others' penpals as well. An unexpected benefit of the letter exchange was the meaningful reading experience gained by the students, since most of them read about 6 to 8 letters per exchange rather than just one (5).

Conclusion

Learning to communicate is important for today's foreign language student, and it is important to provide meaningful communicative experiences in writing as well as speaking the language. "The teacher must do all he or she can to inspire students to write. Topics must be exciting and within their realm of experience" (6). A letter exchange between peers can

provide this kind of exciting and meaningful writing experience for lower-level students.

While not entirely without problems, arranging such an experience for students has many advantages. It allows students to build on their own experiences and yet to communicate at a level that is within their capabilities linguistically. Additionally, it provides meaningful reading experience for students. Most important, it is real communication. "While the linguistic aspects of language may not be retained, the experiences that emerge through communicative and creative use of language will always remain a part of the individual's personal reality" (7). The experience of communicating with and learning about another person is, in itself, a valuable experience, and that it can be done using a foreign language is an added beneficial experience. Developing Spanish writing proficiency is not the real goal, but rather the means to a more important goal: learning to communicate with other people.

Notes

1 Elaine McKee, "Teaching Writing in the Second Language Composition/Conversation Class at the College Level," Foreign Language Annals 14, 4 (September 1981), 274.
2 Fairlee E. Winfield and Paula Barnes-Felfeli, "The Effects of Familiar and Unfamiliar Cultural Context on Foreign Language Composition," The Modern Language Journal 66, 4 (Winter 1982), 377.
3 Edward D. Allen and Rebecca M. Valette, Classroom Techniques: Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), 315.
4 In Ohio, write to The Cardinal, 5069 Traiee Circle NW, Canton, OH 44720.
5 For information on the Language Experience approach to teaching reading, see MaryAnne Hall, Teaching Reading as a Language Experience, (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1976).
6 Allen and Valette, op cit., 317.
7 Barbara Snyder and Carolann DeSelms, "Personal Growth Through Student-Centered Activities," The Foreign Language Classroom: New Techniques, Alan Garfinkel, ed. (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company, 1983), 31.

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